

## Out of Hours

# Why patients and doctors should watch *Inside Out*

### THE ERA OF THE INSTANT FIX

We live in an era of seemingly rising demand and reduced ability to self-manage. Patients want answers instantly to every problem, with the idea of a self-limiting illness increasingly under threat from a culture where it takes 10 minutes to get a new phone contract and even less time to buy a car. Access via the internet to more health information than ever before has fuelled the belief that any slight emotional or physical disturbance must signify some form of serious illness, thus warranting a visit to the doctor.

Doctors feel the pressure to try to respond to these demands in order to make sure that patients feel they are taken seriously. In an increasingly litigious culture, we are all worried about missing a diagnosis, so are tempted to investigate and treat more. All this means that often there is a danger of unnecessary prescription in order to simply get the patient out of the room.

Enter *Inside Out*, Disney Pixar's latest offering, a tightly-wound psychological exploration of joy and sadness cleverly disguised as a children's animated film. The premise is fascinating; that inside each of us emotions are personified and act as guides to guide us through our lives.

The film is set inside the head of an eleven-year old girl, Riley. The emotions, Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Fear, and Anger, are shown as anthropomorphic characters, with Joy being the *de facto* leader who considers it her mission to keep Riley HAPPY! at all costs. Part of this mission involves her keeping Sadness away from the controls of Riley's life, even from events where sadness would be a natural reaction.

This means that Riley's early memories, to Joy's delight, are all happy, golden spheres. Most of these memories are stored in long-term memory, but some become core memories, and are used to

fuel her personality, depicted as islands (friendship Island, goofy island, and so on) within her mind.

However, Riley's world is rocked when her parents move to San Francisco. This upheaval upsets her core memories, sending Joy and Sadness on a journey through her mind to bring them back and restart her personality. While they are on the journey we see Riley's personality islands begin to crumble, leaving her essentially an angry adolescent controlled by Anger, Fear, and Disgust.

For much of the film, Joy frantically tries to fix the situation by sending happy thoughts to Riley, appalled that she should be upset or sad at any point. A pivotal moment takes place where Sadness empathises with a character in Riley's long-term memory by letting him cry and simply being there. This is a far more effective help than Joy's relentless attempts to create false happiness. Joy finally sees that Riley needs Sadness to make sense of her changing world and to colour her memories. At last, Sadness is given a chance to control Riley, and we see that Riley needs her Sadness to express how she feels and to communicate healthily. Eventually Sadness and Joy come together and create a memory together — and a new emotion — calling it melancholy.

### SADNESS IS NORMAL ...

How often in consultations do we tell patients that their Sadness is normal, even necessary? So often patients present in tears during consultations having suffered the loss of a loved one, or disappointment with a failed relationship. So often the request is *'Give me something to take the sadness away!'*, and antidepressants are prescribed in an attempt to deal with the unpleasantness of grieving, and the messiness of teary farewells. It takes courage to tell a patient whose partner

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has just passed away that the empty, tragic feelings of loss are normal. It takes even more to encourage them to let those emotions take control for a while, and still more to allow them to express those emotions in a healthy way. *Inside out* lets us know that it is healthy to embrace Sadness at times, particularly when faced with a tragedy or unexpected change.

### ... AND COLDS AND MILD ILLNESSES SHOULDN'T BE FEARED

Applying this further, *Inside Out* teaches us about physical illness. GPs are often called repeatedly about the same well child with a temperature, where anxious parents are unhappy that their child has been diagnosed with a viral illness and not given medication to stop the fever or runny nose. Fewer parents are happy to be told that their child will get better with time, and continue to demand an instant easy fix, or unnecessary and potentially harmful blood tests. *Inside Out* tells us that these difficult times may be a normal part of growing up, that colds and mild feverish illnesses need not be feared, and that persevering through the challenges of natural physical and emotional peaks and troughs may bring deeper joy. By trying to medicate sadness and normal variation, we risk not only overtreatment but also depriving patients of much-needed emotional engagement.

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